

GARY SCHNEIDER'S SELF SCRUTINY

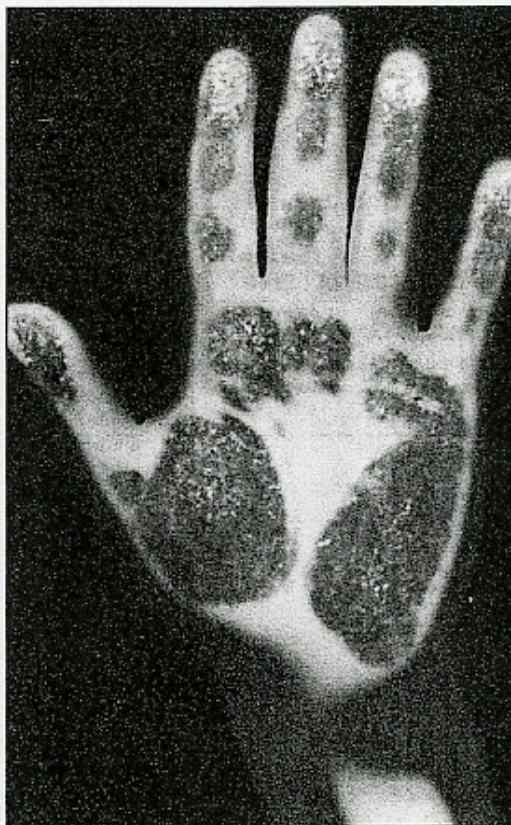
BY JILL WATERMAN

The 1966 sci-fi thriller "Fantastic Voyage" engaged audiences in an uncharted adventure — inside the human body. In 1996 artist Gary Schneider, who exhibits at the Howard Zézerski Gallery in Boston, was invited on his own fantastic voyage, when he was asked to make photographs inspired by the research of the Human Genome Project. The body of work resulting from this photographic exploration is now exhibited and published as *Gary Schneider: Genetic Self-Portrait*.

With previous work addressing identity through conceptual portraiture and a professional background as a master printer, Schneider was well suited to the task of visually interpreting the realms of biological samples and genetic research. Over the course of this project he collaborated with nine different scientists to gather the raw materials used in image making. A wide variety of scientific instruments, from a basic X-ray to a transmission electron microscope were used in the image capture. Schneider's notes to accompany the finished pieces include commentary about the scientific processes. He also describes personal associations used to make decisions about the forms taken in his work. In a noteworthy example, Schneider transforms the culture from a cheek scraping into an expansive grid-work inspired by a heroic Chinese landscape.

Schneider's self-portraits treat the complete spectrum, from microcosm to macrocosm, including such classic pieces of forensic iconography as a dental X-ray and handprints. These elements are incorporated as an emotional response to the Human Genome Project. In his catalog notes the artist writes, "I wanted the portrait to be an act of faith inside my anxiety of stepping into the unknown of future biology. So from the most clinical representation ('DNA Sequence') to the most intimate of images ('Hands') lies the full range of this multi-layered self-portrait."

In 1993, long before starting his genetic self-portraits began, Schneider began to use handprints as a theme for portraiture. In the handprint series, a moist palm is placed straight onto photographic emulsion, then printed as an enlarged photograph. This image-making technique, termed an 'autothermohydrogram' by conservators at the National Gallery of Canada, is also employed in photographs of the artist's cars (exhibited in *Genetic Self-Portrait*) and in face prints such as "Mask" (on



Gary Schneider's 1997 "Hands."

view in the concurrent exhibit *Specimen Drawings* at Eleanor Barefoot Gallery.) The direct physicality of this work presents a strong connection to 19th-century photography, an important influence to Schneider's overall vision.

Details of highlight and shadow are abstracted and reversed in the photograph body-prints. This renders points of contact as a spectral highlight and gives open shadow areas a milky glow. When viewed in exhibition, earlobes suggest the domain of distant constellations and palm prints hover, as if emerging from the smoke of a magic lamp. In a similar spirit, the scientific images resonate with new associations. Chromosomes printed in the negative resemble fuzzy totems aligned along the gallery wall. A DNA sequence becomes a coarsely woven tapestry of human code. Such richness is achieved through a combination of astute aesthetic decision-making and broad leaps of scale. In *Genetic Self-Portrait* Gary Schneider brings new meaning to the words of "Fantastic Voyage" adventurer Raquel Welch "...we're going to see things no one has ever seen before. Not just something under a microscope."

One of the two recent exhibitions by Gary Schneider is currently on view in New York. The exhibition "Specimen Drawings, Photographs 1987-1999" is now being held at Eleanor Barefoot Gallery (580 Broadway in Manhattan) until April 22. Schneider's latest work "Genetic Self-Portrait" was featured last month at the International Center of Photography. Both bodies of work will travel to Mass MoCA, to be shown as part of the major group exhibition "Unnatural Science" (June 3, 2000 - March 15, 2001.) "Genetic Self-Portrait" will be exhibited from June to early autumn; "Specimen Drawings" will be on exhibit from autumn 2000 until March 15, 2001. Schneider's *Genetic Self-Portrait* has recently been published as a hard-bound monograph by Lightwork, Syracuse, NY, and is widely available for purchase. 